Contaminated water kills nine, hospitalises 200 in Indian city

NEW DELHI: At least nine people have died and more than 200 have been hospitalised in the central Indian city of Indore after a diarrhoea outbreak that officials said was linked to contaminated drinking water, according to a lawmaker and local health authorities.

Kailash Vijayvargiya, a lawmaker, said nine people had died in Indore.

Indore's chief medical officer, Madhav Prasad Hasani, told *Reuters* by phone that drinking water in the Bhagirathpur area of the city was contaminated due to a leak and a water test had confirmed the presence of bacteria in the pipeline.

"I cannot say anything on the death toll, but yes, over 200 people from the same locality are undergoing treatment at different hospitals of the city. The final report of the water sample collected from the affected area is awaited," Hasani said.

Shravan Verma, the district administrative officer, said authorities had deployed teams of doctors for door-to-door screening and were distributing chlorine tablets to help purify water.

"We have found one leakage point that could have contaminated the water and that point has been fixed," Verma said, adding that officials had screened 8,571 people and identified 338 with mild symptoms.

Indore, in Madhya Pradesh state, has been named India's cleanest city and has topped the national cleanliness rankings for the past eight years.—Reuters

Heroic staffer blocks 400-pound runaway prop at Disney park

MIAMI: A staffer at Disney World in Florida was hailed as a hero after he blocked a 400-pound (180-kilogram) rubber boulder that was bouncing toward the audience at an *Indiana Jones*-themed live show.

"Whoa! That's heading right for us!" an audience member can be heard saying on a YouTube video of the incident on Tuesday as the weighty object bounces off its track.

The boulder bashes into the staff member who had moved to try to block the prop from bouncing into the audience, knocking him down. Colleagues rush to his aid and quickly get him to his feet, with blood visible on his scalp.

Disney confirmed the incident happened during an "*Indiana Jones* Epic Stunt Spectacular." It said a performer was injured when a prop moved off its track.

"We're focused on supporting our cast member, who is recovering," a Disney spokesperson said in a statement on Friday.

"Safety is at the heart of what we do, and that element of the show will be modified as our safety team completes a review of what happened," the spokesperson added.

The *Indiana Jones* Epic Stunt Spectacular is staged at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida. A blog post on the company's website says the boulder is made of rubber and weighs 400 pounds.

The boulder chasing Indiana Jones is an iconic scene from 1981's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* — the first installment of the popular franchise about a daring archaeologist.—AFP

UKRAINE's President Volodymyr Zelensky (left) meets Kyrylo Budanov, the new chief of the Military Intelligence service. Budanov succeeded Andriy Yermak, who resigned in November over a corruption scandal.—AFP

Mamdani vows to enact 'socialist agenda' after taking oath as NY mayor

NEW YORK: Democrat Zohran Mamdani became New York City's mayor on Thursday, vowing during a public swearing-in ceremony on the steps of City Hall to enact an aggressive agenda aimed at making the United States largest city more affordable for working people.

Mamdani, a member of his party's left-wing democratic socialist faction, was elected in November in a prominent victory that could influence this year's mid-term elections, which will determine control of the US Congress.

Some Democrats have embraced his style while Republicans portray him as a foil on the national political stage.

The 34-year-old campaigned heavily on cost-of-living issues and was sharply critical of Republican President Donald Trump, whose approval rating has fallen over the past year amid economic concerns.

Many of New York's eight million residents — some with hope, some with trepidation — expect him to be a disruptive political force. In a speech following his public swearing-in, Mamdani promoted core campaign promises of universal childcare, affordable rents, and free bus service.

"We will answer to all New Yorkers, not to any billionaire or oligarch who thinks they can buy our democracy," he said. "I was elected as a democratic socialist, and I will govern as a democratic socialist."

'Tax the rich'

The programme for Mamdani's inauguration included remarks by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, fellow democratic socialists at the vanguard of the Democratic Party's liberal wing.

Sanders, whom Mamdani calls his inspiration, defended the latter's agenda.

"Making sure that people can live in affordable housing is not radical," Sanders said. "It is the right and decent thing to do."

The crowd of several thousand cheered loudly when Sanders called on America's millionaires and billionaires to pay more in taxes, breaking into a chant of "tax the rich".

Even with temperatures well below freezing, the city set up a viewing area along Broadway to allow thousands more to watch a livestream of the ceremony, which included musical performances.

Mae Hardman-Hill, 27, volunteered for Mamdani's campaign and said it felt like his political momentum was growing.

"I'm a native New Yorker. I've watched the city like you just become less and less affordable, less and less livable," Hardman-Hill said. "I'm really excited for ... regular people to get some power back again."

Republicans blast Mamdani

Hours after Mamdani took office, the lead group tasked with electing Republicans to the House of Representatives sought to portray him as a "radical socialist".

"Every time Mamdani opens his mouth or swipes his pen, he tattoos the Democratic Party's failures onto every House Democrat facing voters in 2026," spokesperson Mike Marinella said in a statement.

Mamdani promised a freeze on rents and free buses and childcare, building a campaign around affordability issues that some have seen as a path forward for the Democratic Party ahead of the mid-term elections.—Reuters

Ukraine orders evacuation from frontline in Zaporizhzhia

KYIV: Ukraine has ordered the evacuation of thousands of children and their parents from frontline settlements in the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions, where Russian troops have been advancing, a Ukrainian official said on Friday.

"Due to the difficult security situation, a decision was made to forcibly evacuate more than 3,000 children and their parents from 44 frontline settlements in the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions," Restoration Minister Oleksiy Kuleba said on *Telegram*.

The evacuations, Kuleba said, were also ongoing in the northern Chernigiv region, which borders Moscow-allied Belarus and has been the target of Russian shelling.

"In total, 150,000 people have been evacuated from frontline areas to safer regions since June 1. Among them are nearly 18,000 children and more than 5,000 people with limited mobility," Kuleba said.

Moscow's forces, who invaded Ukraine in Feb 2022, have been grinding their way through the industrial Dnipropetrovsk region.

In the southern Zaporizhzhia region, Russian advances have been rarer than in the embattled east, but have accelerated in recent months.

Russia has in recent months claimed to have captured new settlements in both regions.

In Sept 2022, Russia claimed to have officially annexed the Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Lugansk and Kherson regions, although it did not claim full military control of all of them.

Highest gains for Russia

Russia's battlefield gains in Ukraine last year were the highest since 2022, an analysis showed, as Kyiv was set to host security advisers from allied states on Saturday despite Moscow's unrelenting strikes.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said around 15 countries would attend the talks, along with representatives from the European Union and Nato, and with a US delegation joining the meeting via video link.—Reuters

School syllabus shows link to gay website

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka launched a criminal investigation on Friday after a government syllabus for 11 and 12-year-olds directed pupils to a gay chat website to improve their language skills.

The education ministry lodged a formal complaint with police and launched an internal inquiry to establish how the blunder took place.

"We suspect sabotage," Education Secretary Nalaka Kaluwewe said.

"We are in the process of implementing educational reforms, and this could be an attempt to stall them."

The grade six English syllabus suggested pupils could find a pen-pal to improve their language skills via buddy.net — an online chat website titled the "Bad Boys Club", which invites users to "show your kinky side".

Homosexual activity is illegal in Sri Lanka, and the penalty for same-sex relations is up to 10 years in prison.—AFP

Agonising wait as Switzerland works to identify fire victims

CRANS MONTANA: Families endured an agonising wait for news of their loved ones on Friday as Swiss investigators rushed to identify victims of a ski resort fire at a New Year's celebration that killed 40 people.

Authorities began moving bodies from the burned-out bar in the luxury ski resort town Crans-Montana on Friday morning, with the first silver-coloured hearse rolling into the funeral centre in nearby Sion shortly after 11am (1000 GMT).

Around 115 people were injured in the fire, many of them in critical condition.

As the scope of the tragedy — one of Switzerland's worst — began to sink in, Crans-Montana appeared enveloped in a stunned silence.

"The atmosphere is heavy," Dejan Bajic, a 56-year-old tourist from Geneva who has been coming to the resort since 1974, said.

"It's like a small village; everyone knows someone who knows someone who's been affected," he said.

Bystanders described scenes of panic and chaos as people tried to break the windows to escape, and others, covered in burns, poured into the street.

Screaming in pain

Edmond Cocquyt, a Belgian tourist, said he had seen "bodies lying here, ... covered with a white sheet", and "young people, totally burned, who were still alive... Screaming in pain".

The exact death toll could rise, with canton president Mathias Reynard telling a regional newspaper that 80 of the 115 injured were in critical condition. Swiss authorities warned it could take days to identify everyone who perished, an agonising wait for family and friends.

Condolences poured in from around the world, including from Pope Leo XIV, who offered "compassion and solidarity" to victims' families.

Desperate appeals

Online, desperate appeals abound to find the missing.

"We've tried to reach our friends. We took loads of photos and posted them on *Instagram*, *Facebook*, all possible social networks to try to find them," said Eleonore, 17. "But there's nothing. No response."

'The apocalypse'

The exact number of people who were at the bar when it went up in flames remains unclear.

Le Constellation had a capacity of 300 people, plus another 40 people on its terrace, according to the Crans-Montana website.

Swiss President Guy Parmelin, who took office on Thursday, called the fire "a calamity of unprecedented, terrifying proportions" and announced that flags would be flown at half-mast for five days.

"We thought it was just a small fire, but when we got there, it was war," Mathys, from a neighbouring village, said.

"That's the only word I can use to describe it: the apocalypse." Authorities have declined to speculate on what caused the tragedy, saying only that it was not an attack.

Several witness accounts, broadcast by various media, pointed to sparklers mounted on champagne bottles and held aloft by restaurant staff as part of a "show" for patrons.

Pictures and videos shared on social media also showed sparklers on champagne bottles held into the air, as an orange glow began spreading across the ceiling.

One video showed the flames advancing quickly as revellers initially continued to dance.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

CHENNAI: Artists get ready to perform Mohiniyattam, a dance form of Kerala, during a cultural event.—AFP

TEHRAN: A view of bank notes of one million, 500,000, and 100,000 rials. Iran's currency has lost more than a third of its value against the dollar over the past year, while double-digit hyperinflation has been undermining purchasing power for years.—AFP

ACAPULCO: Tourists wait outside after evacuating their hotels during a 6.5 magnitude earthquake in Mexico's Guerrero state. The quake was also felt in Mexico City.—AFP

ACTRESS Angelina Jolie meets employees of the Egyptian Red Crescent at the Rafah border crossing during her visit to observe how aid enters the Gaza Strip.—AFP

Jolie visits Egyptian side of Rafah crossing

RAFAH: Hollywood star Angelina Jolie visited the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing into Gaza on Friday, where she spoke with members of the Red Crescent and truck drivers ferrying humanitarian aid.

Accompanied by an American delegation and greeted by former and current officials, Jolie said she was "honoured" to meet aid volunteers at the crossing.

A Red Crescent volunteer told the Oscar winner that "there are thousands of aid trucks just waiting" at the border crossing.

According to local media, the actor and former special envoy for the UN refugee agency visited to see the condition of injured Palestinians transferred to Egypt and to look into aid deliveries into the devastated territory.

The Rafah border crossing was set to be reopened under the ceasefire in effect in Gaza since October, but has so far remained closed.

In a joint statement on Friday, Egypt and six other countries, including Saudi Arabia, "urged the international community to pressure Israel, as the occupying power, to immediately lift the constraints on the entry and distribution of essential supplies" to Gaza.

Jolie, one of Hollywood's most iconic figures, stepped down from her role as special envoy for the United Nations refugee agency at the end of 2022 after more than 20 years of service, saying she wanted to work on broader humanitarian issues.—AFP

FRANKFURT: Swans float in a partially ice-covered pond at a park in western Germany as the temperature reached three degrees Celsius.—AFP

MALTA: Crew members of *Ocean Viking*, a rescue ship operated by the NGO SOS Mediterranee, take part in a night watch after rescuing 33 migrants from an oil tanker that caught fire in international waters between Malta and Tunisia.—AFP